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ABSTRACT

Play should be taken seriously because of its relevance for future workers. Current research indicates that the most successful workers are creative and socially capable rather than merely highly skilled or intelligent. Play enables children to develop lifelong interpersonal skills that will enhance success in the future workplace. Play scenarios may be interpreted to show how they enable children to develop social competence, set and solve interesting problems, and thus develop the types of skills needed as future effective employees. Two key features of play identified in Vygotskian theory involve the development of impulse control and following social rules for acceptable behavior in pretend situations. The social benefits of impulse control are seen in successful adults. Developmentally appropriate early childhood programs center their curriculum around play, according to guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Representational play seen in the dramatic play area provides children with opportunities to practice and develop skills later needed by them to be successful workers, such as communication skills, decision making, problem solving, negotiation, and role taking. Early childhood educators need to feel validated in their advocacy of play for its own sake, its value for children, and its value in helping to develop competent adults. (KDFB)

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On-the-Job Training: Children's Play and Work

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Ongoing media discussions forecast trends facing the work force in the year 2000. The airwave ethos predicts that workers of the future will change jobs every three to five years and that the loyal company employee with a guaranteed job for life is a person of the past. What do these same pundits say about the characteristics of the successful job hunter of the future? Besides the obvious technological proficiencies, so-called people skills are often cited: ability to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, problem solve, be assertive, empathize, be flexible, "read others," listen actively, and control impulses. In addition, workers will need to consider themselves "self-employed" to successfully ride the waves of periodic job change.

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Success in Life and Work

In the recent bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), Daniel Goleman described the qualities that characterize people who excel in life: self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal, self-motivation, empathy, and social deftness. In reviewing data from a study comparing the destinies of ninety-five Harvard grads from the classes of the 1940s who had roughly equal intellectual abilities, schooling, and opportunity, he observed that at middle age "men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their lower-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity, or status in their field" (Goleman, 1995, p. 35). He also cited a similar follow-up study, done with 450 boys who grew up in comparatively different circumstances in Somerville, Massachusetts, a "blighted slum" a few blocks from Harvard. In review of the study, he noted that "childhood abilities such as being able to handle frustrations, control emotions, and get on with other people made the greater difference . . ." These abilities surpassed IQ in determining how men fared at work by age forty-seven (Goleman, 1995, p. 35). Goleman links the two studies to make the point that high IQ and academic achievement offer little or no preparation for the turmoil of life's challenges, and that interpersonal skills can better predict work success.

Goleman often refers to Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory (1983) in his discussion of emotional intelligence. He particularly discusses four separate abilities that identify the components of interpersonal intelligence:

- organizing groups: leadership skills to coordinate the efforts of a network of people, as seen in theater directors, military officers, heads of organizations;

- negotiating solutions: mediation skills to prevent conflicts or resolve issues, as seen in the dealmaker, diplomat, lawyer, manager in a takeover;

- personal connections: relationship skills to recognize, respond, and empathize appropriately with people's feelings and concerns, as seen in the good business partner, salesperson, teacher;

- social analysis: insight skills to detect other's feelings, motives, and concerns, as seen in the therapist, counselor, novelist, dramatist.

Play and its Relationship to Success in Life and Work (On-the-Job Training)

If emotional intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and people skills are key characteristics of the successful adult, how do these abilities develop? This article suggests that these abilities begin to develop during the early childhood years through "on-the-job training," or play. Through play, children have endless opportunities to develop their emotional intelligence and interpersonal intelligence. The particular focus of this article will be the role of play in developing important lifelong skills that ultimately enhance success in the workplace of the future. It will examine the rationale of early childhood programs in promoting play. Theory espoused by Vygotsky, as discussed by Berk (1994) in terms of imaginative play, will serve as the springboard for this discussion. In addition, criteria used to determine program quality and accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) will also be discussed in light of their relevance to the development of social skills even beyond early childhood programs.

Implications of Berk's research on Vygotsky and Play

According to Berk, the ideas of Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky have greatly affected current notions about the education of young children. In Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the "mind extends beyond the skin" and is joined with other minds (Vygotsky, quoted in Berk, 1994, p. 30). Social interaction affects the development of our thinking and how we interpret the world. Correspondingly, language plays a critical role, for it is our foremost contact in social and mental contact with others. According to Berk (1994, p. 30), "a basic premise of Vygotsky's theory is that all uniquely human, higher forms of mental activity are jointly constructed and transferred to children through dialogues with other people."

Careful design of cooperative learning often exemplifies Vygotsky's theory, wherein small groups of children with varying

competencies share responsibilities and resolve differences as they work toward a common goal. Although Vygotsky's ideas have been implemented in more "academic" areas such as science and social studies, their importance is also reflected in his views on play, particularly make-believe or representational play. His views on the importance of social experience and language in interpreting the world and communicating with others are consistent with his views on representational play, which develops primarily during the preschool years (Berk, 1994).

In her review of current research, Berk noted that Vygotsky considered play a major factor in development by creating a "'zone of proximal development in the child'" (Berk, 1994, p. 31). Peers, parents, teachers, and other adults interact with children in their play and help to extend, elaborate, and "scaffold" play to higher levels of psychological functioning. According to Berk, Vygotsky identified two key features in the development of play: First, he concluded that "representational play creates an imaginary situation that permits the child to grapple with unrealizable desires." Thus, children must learn to develop impulse control and to defer gratification. Second, representational play includes "rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully act out the play scene." These "rules" are social ones for acceptable behavior in given pretend situations, such as playing bedtime, house, or fire station. According to Berk, Vygotsky's attributes of play—"an imaginary situation governed by rules"—are central to the role of play in a child's development. In order to follow the rules of play in a given situation, impulsive action must be replaced by self-regulatory behavior.

Goleman also discusses the importance of impulse control in *Emotional Intelligence* (1995, p. 285), stating, "Being able to put aside one's self-centered focus and impulses has social benefits: it opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another person's perspective. . . . These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive public discourse." As Goleman notes, our increasingly diverse society requires that that those who are considered successful adults be willing to consider other's points of view and be able to delay self-gratification. Impulse control and delay of gratification are also

implicit factors in Berk's emphasis on the importance of self-regulatory behavior, which is inherent in satisfying representational play scenarios.

Play at the Center of the Curriculum

Early childhood programs that are considered "developmentally appropriate" (NAEYC criteria) center their curriculum around play. According to the NAEYC, a key indicator of quality is the significance of play in a program's philosophy. This play should occur in uninterrupted blocks of time with inclusion of choice, developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive props, and adult facilitators to model and encourage quality interactions, language skills, and cognitive development. The NAEYC position holds that play affords the young child many opportunities to develop cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills. When play is at the center of the curriculum, as the NAEYC suggests, children develop key traits that translate into the potentially desirable skills of an effective employee.

The Play Scenario

The dramatic play area is typically the "hub" of representational play. Often, themes are employed to encourage pretend play (e.g., restaurant, hospital, grocery store, post office, fire station, space station). Various props may be included to add to the authenticity of the experience and to encourage language development, social interaction, language usage, and practice of various roles, such as firefighter, clerk, doctor, parent, teacher, baby, etc. During play the child has multiple opportunities to practice and develop the capacities and "emotional intelligence" described by Goleman and referred to by Vygotsky in emphasizing the importance of representational play in a child's development of knowledge through social experience.

In representational play, social conventions govern the rules of behavior for a particular scenario—for example, the restaurant. Although the play is pretend, children assume typical roles as customers, waiter, chef, and cashier. Peer and adult interactions enhance learning through language interplay, acting out of typically acceptable behaviors, and social exchanges.

To be accepted into this ongoing representational play situa-

tion, several important events must take place. First, a child must make a decision to join the group. Then the child must find a way to acceptably enter the group's play. The child must be willing to express his/her desires for a role and be willing to negotiate, compromise, or wait for a turn. Once a child joins the play situation, he/she must be willing to accept the rules of behavior for this scenario or to collaborate in shifting them in a mutually agreeable manner. As play continues, the child needs to actively listen to others and to consider their points of view in order to maintain acceptance. Finally, the child must collaborate with peers to achieve ultimate satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment through play.

During representational play with peers, children have many wonderful opportunities to develop and practice those skills later needed by successful workers. A wealth of language experiences specific to the situation are available to the child. Social learning takes place as the child interacts with the group. The child must play alongside and communicate with those different from himself/herself—perhaps someone from another culture, race, family structure, or someone who is physically limited or of another age. The child needs to make decisions, articulate his/her needs effectively, problem solve to achieve the goals of the play scenario, compromise and negotiate, listen attentively, and understand the acceptable rules of behavior for the particular play situation. Skills that must be applied in play include those qualities identified by Vygotsky and Goleman as central to development and later success in life: self-control, delay of gratification, and social understanding,

During play, children also get to be risk takers and try on different roles. For example, play affords children the opportunity to experiment with roles typically associated with a single gender. Boys may practice nurturing and caretaking skills, while girls become construction workers. Some children organize the group and coordinate various activities, practicing leadership skills. Those who are active listeners and who are perceptive to the needs of others help to solve problems and to mediate the play situation. Children who may be shy can pretend to be adventurous or in charge. Children with limited English speaking skills get to practice their language skills in a nonthreatening environment where language is rich and modeled by their peers. Children also have safe opportunities to experiment with outrageous or unconventional

behaviors, behaviors that may need to be altered in response to feedback from peers. Opportunities abound for practicing those creative, risk-taking behaviors that employers are looking for in effective employees, the same skills needed by those who are successfully self-employed.

Pretend play also offers opportunities for children to use their imaginations and to develop creative problem-solving strategies. For example, children in a fire-fighting scenario may plan daring rescues that entail the timely consideration of alternative rescue plans, on-the-spot decision making, teamwork, communication, and creative use of available resources. Correspondingly, with workplace situations more and more in flux, the need has never been greater for workers who, like children, can "play" with ideas and consider multiple and creative strategies while realizing the pitfalls and possibilities of various solutions. For example, those involved with developing proposals or marketing new products must work together to identify needs, develop creative, competitive, cost-efficient strategies, communicate their plan effectively, and make use of available resources to successfully implement the plan—skills also exercised in the play fire-fighting scenario.

Implications for Parents, Early Childhood Providers, and Program Administrators

Early childhood programs that promote play and view it as a chance to "scaffold" learning are helping children to develop those lifelong people skills that help to determine their success in life and work. Educators of young children need to feel validated in their advocacy of play for its own sake, for its value for children, and for its value in helping to develop competent adults. Well-informed and articulate educators are in the unique position of influencing policy in their relationship with administrators, school boards, and parents. Often, administrators concerned with such issues as deteriorating school system test scores pressure early childhood teachers into limiting play opportunities and centering curriculum around a more academic, skills-based approach. Parents often rely on educators to help them form their philosophy of child-rearing practices, and in their quest to best prepare their child to enter school, many want emphasis placed on a skills-based curriculum. They often feel the pressures of colleagues and neighbors to give their child a

"head start" in their schooling, not fully understanding the value of play in their child's development. Therefore, educators of young children need to be able to effectively articulate and argue the value of play-oriented curriculum that ultimately provides young children with on-the-job training for later success in life and work.